

Irreverent student DJs thrive on unpredictability

By Steve Knopper
News Leader staff writer

The 4-foot Yiddish-speaking chicken never has set foot in the WVC Double Zoo, but the chicken's companion has a lot in common with the zoo's keepers.

They're all student disc jockeys for local campus radio stations. University of Richmond senior Chris Catanese is host for the chicken show on WDCE-FM. Across town, Virginia Commonwealth University students Robert Fleskes and Jay Brooke run the zoo show on WVCW-AM.

"I think it would be great for a little more healthy competition between the stations," said Catanese, a UR disc jockey who was station manager of WDCE for two years.

Currently, WDCE is the most-listened-to college radio station in town, simply because it's FM (90.1) and includes much of Richmond as its audience. WVCW, at 640 AM, can be heard only in certain VCU campus buildings.

Both feature programs by irreverent student DJs whose musical tastes vault the mainstream.

During a recent show, Catanese's Yiddish alter-ego — reportedly a former basketball referee — spoke a few words between music by Shriekback, Flesh for Lulu, House of Freaks and the Lightning Seeds.

In the cramped studio recording booth, Catanese whirled in his swivel chair, spun a few knobs, packed up a compact disc and pushed a few buttons. Then the phone rang, and he listened.

"I haven't heard that in years!" he said, replacing the phone receiver. " 'Bitchin' Camaro! 'Bitchin' Camaro!'"

Then, unlike other local radio DJs, he played the Dead Milkmen's 1985 sneering joke-classic.

"If it's obscene, we'll say don't play it," Catanese said. Other than that and a mandate of one song per hour from a set playlist, very few rules guide WDCE's programming.

Professional Richmond radio stations set their scheduled songs in concrete, but WDCE thrives on unpredictability. At any given time, a DJ might play jazz, heavy metal, gospel, new wave or straight-ahead, garage-style rock 'n' roll.

The station's Sunday after-

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Chris Catanese (left), host for the chicken show on the University of R station, and station manager Alex Wasseliew, get ready for a broadcas

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noon house music show, Catanese said, reaches "just about everybody who wants to listen to rap in Richmond."

Only "classic rock," the Led Zeppelin-Rolling Stones-Beatles mainstays of other local rock stations, is taboo at WDCE — except for a two-hour Sunday night program.

"We have every type of music here — except what you're going to hear on Q-94 or XL-102," said senior Alex Wassiliew, the station's current general manager. "I'm trying to phase out classic rock."

While the WDCE staff prides itself on its lack of structure — though Wassiliew points out that many staff members have had professional training — the less-heard WVCW hails its professional programming and technical know-how.

"We're the only two stations that play college radio; in that, they're our arch rivals," said Fleskes, a VCU sophomore and the station's public service and news director. "We think we've got a better station."

The "WVC Double Zoo" program, which features Fleskes and Brooke as hosts, combines public service announcements, staff-made advertisements and a combination of mainstream and progressive music.

Fleskes and Brooke bound around the room, alternately snagging compact discs and records from various shelves and bins, and talking about Guns N' Roses singer Axl Rose's court problems on one of two studio microphones. They play four songs per hour from a playlist and carefully log the ones they select.

The station avoids music aired on professional radio — the Replacements and 24-7 Spyz are about as mainstream as it gets. "XL-102 stuff — that stuff sells," Brooke said. "The major stations are out to make money."

Many of the 30 staff members work for local professional stations to pick up programming and broadcasting techniques.

"We have made the station a tool for how to learn the art of broadcasting," said station manager Max Ryder, a VCU student who also is host of a weekend program on WRXL-FM (XL-102). "We take the time to teach our DJs. Some people may actually see us as being strict. It's a good feeling to see that."